

## **It was rubbish then and it's rubbish now**

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### **Abstract (Summary)**

Dr. Ernst Dichter was the guy who in the 1950s became a household name, thanks to Vance Packard's best-selling 1957 classic, "The Hidden Persuaders." In the book Packard talks about "the large-scale efforts being made, often with impressive success, to channel unthinking habits, purchasing decisions and thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry." Throughout the book, Packard used the term "motivational research," which had been around since the 1930s, but MR (as he referred to it) really took off in the 1950s, primarily because of the efforts of Dichter and Louis Cheskin. But motivational research never went away and has been continually reinvented.

IN THE LAST EPISODE of the much-hyped AMC series "Mad Men," Lion Draper, an über-creative director, has a meeting with the research director. The only female in the building does something besides empty ashtrays and bring coffee and aspirin for hangovers, she also sports a Nurse Diesel accent, tweedy clothes and thick horn-rimmed glasses. An, I thought it must be Dr. Ernst Dichter's sister. Or perhaps the doctor himself in drag.

Dichter was the guy who in the '50s became a household name, thanks to Vanee Packard's best-selling 1957 classic, "The Hidden Persuaders. "

In the book Packard talks about "the large-scale efforts being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry." The examples he used were presented as proof of the success of these methods-even though the methods were rarely identified-so it all sounded pretty scary. In addition, the post-Korean War and McCarthy-hearings '50s were rife with rumors of the Red Menace and Manchurian Candidate-like mind manipulation, so the media were happy to ride this wave of paranoia.

### **'MOTIVATIONAL RESEARCH'**

Throughout the book, Packard used the term "motivational research," which had been around since the '30s, but MR (as he referred to it) really took off in the '50s, primarily because of the efforts of Dichter and Louis Cheskin.

Dichter was the archetypical European "shrink" with tweedy suits and jelly-jar spectacles. He was the founder of the Institute of Motivational Research, where he and his staff of acolytes, working out of a Gothic pile overlooking the Hudson River, studied the effects of TV cartoons on the toilet habits of children and why women prefer certain kinds of ketchup during their menstrual cycles. He insisted on being referred to as "doctor" even though there's doubt he ever received a bachelor's degree, let alone a doctorate. According to Dichter, humans were immature, with irrational insecurities and insatiable erotic desires. This provided titillating and easy-to-understand explanations for hard-to-comprehend consumer behavior. Plus, liberal helpings of sexual innuendo dressed up as science never hurt anyone.

Dichter's star shone brightly in the '50s, but in the late '60s he quickly fell from favor and disappeared.

Cheskin, however, lasted much longer, and even today his company survives. That's because Cheskin thought relying primarily on Freudian psychology-as Dichter did-was not the way to go when poking around in the human psyche. An example of this is cigarettes. Dichter claimed women smoked more when ads showed "erect" cigarettes in the hands of other women because they suffered from "penis envy." Cheskin merely claimed that women smoked more when they saw pictures of other women smoking. I must confess that although Dichter's theory is more titillating, I'm with Cheskin here.

Cheskin's work was based on logic rather than bullshit. It's no surprise Cheskin is remembered for many successes, including the Marlboro Man, the Gerber Baby, and research responsible for the Ford Mustang and Lincoln Continental.

Dichter is remembered for telling [Mattel](#) to make Barbie's boobs bigger prior to the line's launch. No surprises there.

But motivational research never went away and has been continually reinvented. We now have psychomarketing/branding companies again claiming to be able to delve into the consumer's mind and deliver triggers that create messages that bring on insatiable desires for products. Much of it is data-driven. It relies on masses of information that, through digital technology, allow practitioners to forecast what messages will influence a single mother of three on welfare, living in a trailer park in Georgia, to buy a certain brand of cornflakes.

Often referred to as psychometrics, this new interpretation of motivational research relies on such awe-inspiring and exciting-sounding techniques as "factor analysis, multidimensional scaling and data clustering." Very impressive but, in my opinion, still mostly bullshit.

You can read more about it in "The Ubiquitous Persuaders," my 50-year update on Packard's classic. It'll be published in time to make your Christmas list.

Oh, and Don wouldn't have thrown that research in the trash. In 1960, he would have read it cover to cover, even though in those days, it was definitely entirely bullshit.

#### **[Sidebar]**

PACKARD: In this book, he discusses "large-scale efforts being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry."

#### **[Author Affiliation]**

George Parker is a freelance creative consultant whose acerbic reviews of the current ad scene you can find at [adscam.typepad.com](http://adscam.typepad.com). You can also enjoy his last book, "MadScam," while waiting for his new blockbuster, "The Ubiquitous Persuaders," a 50-year update of Vaneer Packard's classic, which will be published to great acclaim in December.